Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

United States Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service

Wildlife Leaflet 252

Chicago, Ill. * April 1944

LOCAL CONTROL OF MAGPIES THROUGH DESTROYING NESTS AND ROOSTS AND THROUGH TRAPPING

By E. R. Kalmbach, Senior Biologist
Division of Wildlife Research

LIBRARY
CURRENT SERIAL RECORD
☆ FEB 27 1945 ☆
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

ECONOMIC STATUS OF THE MAGPIE

The American magpie (Pica pica hudsonia), a common bird of the plains and mountains of the West, exerts an economic influence not greatly different from that of the crow (Corvus brachyrhynchos) in the East, but a study of its food habits indicates that it surpasses the crow as an insect eater. Destructive weevils, caterpillars, and grasshoppers are prominent in its insect food, which forms nearly 36 percent of the bird's annual diet. The magpie also destroys a certain, though limited, number of small rodents, and it is beneficial as a carrion feeder. On the other hand, it has outstanding faults. It sometimes destroys poultry and beneficial wild birds and their eggs; and it has at times become a pest on cattle, sheep, and hog ranches by attacking sick, weak, or injured animals.

At times magpies become so bold in a locality or gather in such great numbers that their faults are emphasized to a degree that warrants control. As in most, if not all, problems of bird control, the need for drastic action against the magpie is confined to local areas where one or another of its aggressions has thus become unduly conspicuous. Over much of its range the bird is not an outstanding agricultural pest where it appears in moderate numbers, nor is it a serious menace to other wild birds, and there are times when its influence may even be beneficial. The reasoning that the magpie, or any other bird, is a proper subject for control at all times because it is sometimes objectionable, is wholly fallacious. As time goes on and studies of the economic relations of birds advance, it becomes more and more apparent that the real need for control is primarily local. It is to help meet such local needs that this leaflet has been prepared.

DESTROYING NESTS AND YOUNG

During the breeding season magpies inflict their most frequent damage on poultry. At that time the systematic destruction of the birds' nests with their eggs or young will aid in local control. Persistent raids by magpies on a particular poultry yard usually can be traced to a pair or two with young nearby. The elimination of these, preferably with the shotgun, will put a stop to the trouble.

Removal of Roosts

Magpies customarily resort to nightly roosts during the winter months, and at that time their numbers can be reduced with little difficulty either through concerted shooting or, should facilities and experienced help be available, by "bombing". The latter procedure should be carried out only by those who are trained in the use of explosives, and it need not be discussed further in this leaflet. Shooting, to be effective, should be carried out by an organized group of men who approach the roosts after dark and direct their fire simultaneously at the densest aggregations of birds. Several nights of shooting will result in the destruction of most of the birds and the dispersal of survivors.

TRAPPING

In areas where heavy snowfall and low temperatures cause magpies to congregate about corrals and along sheltered creek beds, trapping is recommended. This practice is being more widely employed; it is economical and has the outstanding merit that it can be made safe and selective in operation in regard to other species.

Australian Crow Trap

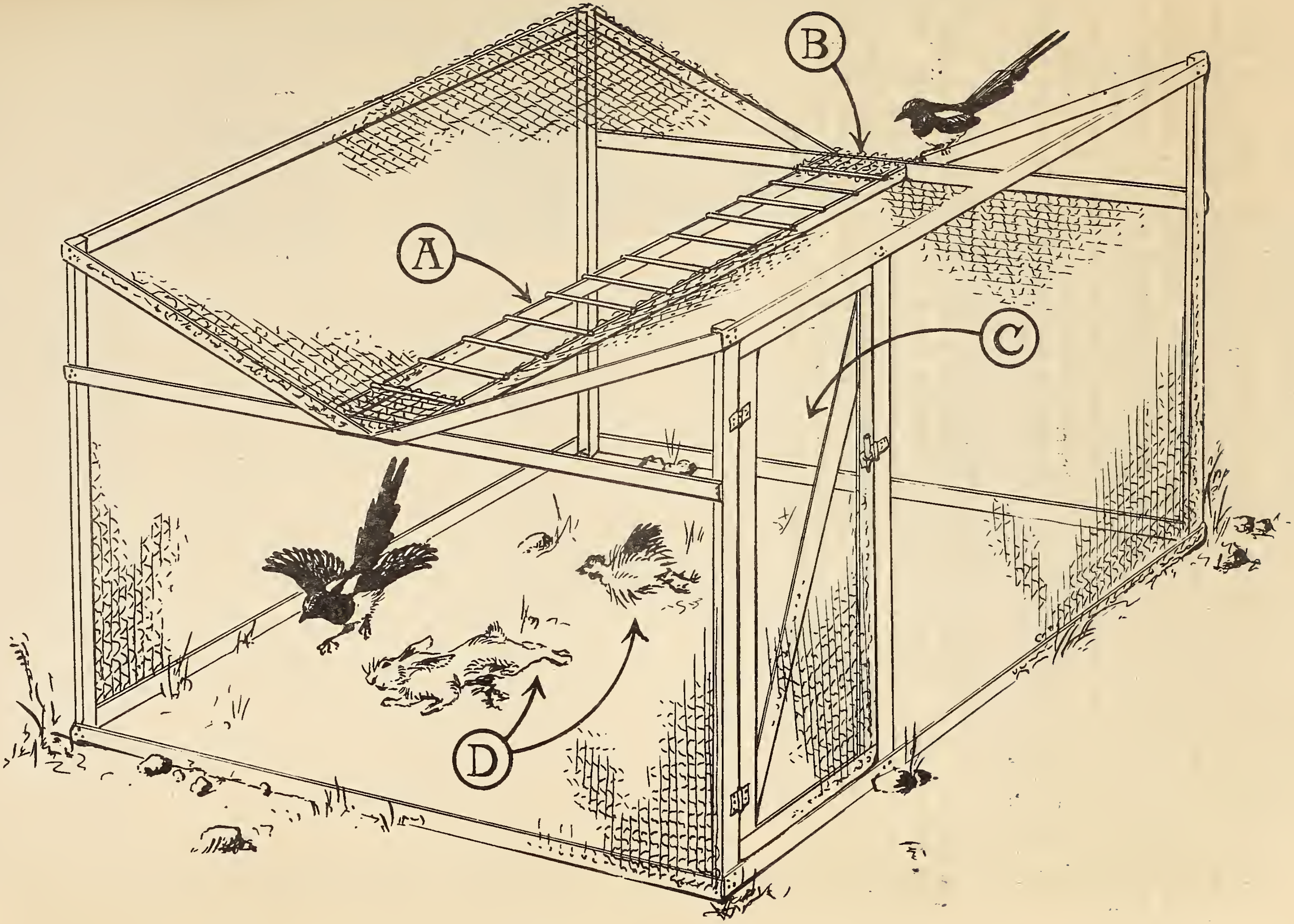
The so-called "Australian crow trap" (fig. 1) has proved successful in magpie control at localities in Colorado, Wyoming, and in other parts of the West. This is a cage trap of the self-operating type. It has been used in controlling crows in the northern States and white-necked ravens (Corvus cryptoleucus) in Texas, carrion being used as a lure. The principle of its operation is simple. The birds enter the trap between the slats of a ladderlike opening in the depression of a V-shaped top. In trying to escape they will go to the outer walls rather than to the openings in the middle of the roof.

There is no set rule in regard to dimensions, except that it is desirable that the trap should be high enough to permit the operator to capture and remove the imprisoned birds without discomfort. A trap with a base 10 feet square and a height of 6 feet at the outer corners, and with the ladderlike entrance (fig. 1, A) 4½ feet from the ground, will be found satisfactory. The sides of the ladder should be 18 inches apart and the slats placed at 6-inch intervals. At the ends of the ladder the space into the first opening (fig. 1, B) is covered with wire screen or a board to prevent the birds from clambering up the end wall of the cage and escaping at this opening. A door (fig. 1, C) should be built into one corner to permit access to the interior for the removal of the captured birds.

Frequently the materials for the trap frame can be picked up about the farm or obtained at little cost. For magpies, the wire poultry netting should be of 1-inch or 1½-inch mesh.

Operation of Trap

The magpie trap should be placed near a corral or in a sheltered spot in a creek bottom to which the birds are partial. It may be baited



39470

FIGURE 1.—Adaptation of the Australian crow trap, which has been used successfully in the control of magpies, crows, and white-necked ravens. (B5977M)

either with part of a large carcass or with the bodies of rabbits or other small mammals (fig. 1, D). Fresh carcasses are more attractive than those that have dried out or become solidly frozen, and for this reason baits should be renewed from time to time. Bodies of jack rabbits, cottontails, or chickens killed on highways are convenient sources of bait material, and frequently may be had merely for the trouble of collecting them. After magpies have begun entering the trap, one or two should be left in it from day to day as a lure. The others should be removed and killed, and their bodies disposed of in such way as to leave no feathers or other litter nearby.

In a trap similar to that described more than 800 magpies were caught in one year on a Wyoming ranch. Not all the birds were local residents, and observations indicated that the carrion lures had attracted them from a wide range of country. In Colorado, where a State-wide program was carried out cooperatively between ranchers and the State Game and Fish Department, more than 19,000 magpies were removed through the use of traps during a recent winter. Trapping should remedy many of the acute local situations arising from an overabundance of magpies about ranches.